



Communication of Succession Intent and Corporate Governance in Family-Owned SMEs in Uganda's Central Region

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Abstract: Communication of succession intent and corporate governance are critical determinants of sustainability in family-owned enterprises. This study examined the clarity of succession strategies, employee engagement, and role alignment, mediated by governance practices, to assess their influence on the sustainability of selected family-owned SMEs in Uganda's central region. The study adopted a mixed-method exploratory design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews to capture both statistical relationships and contextual insights. Quantitative data were collected from 166 respondents using structured questionnaires, while qualitative insights were obtained through key informant interviews. Findings revealed that clarity of succession communication moderately enhanced transparency ($M = 3.199$, $SD = 1.151$), while employee awareness ($M = 3.711$, $SD = 0.874$) and role alignment ($M = 3.922$, $SD = 0.623$) strongly reinforced confidence and continuity. Regression results confirmed that succession communication significantly predicts sustainability ($\beta = 0.362$, $R^2 = 0.337$, $p < 0.001$), while corporate governance emerged as an even stronger predictor. Qualitative evidence highlighted emotional reluctance and informal practices as barriers, with leaders admitting, "everything is in my head," yet positive examples emphasized merit-based transparency. The study concludes that transparent communication, reinforced by governance, reduces uncertainty, mitigates conflicts, and transforms succession planning into a structured, accountable system. Recommendations include formalizing communication strategies, institutionalizing open forums, integrating succession into performance reviews, and strengthening governance frameworks to ensure resilience and long-term sustainability of family-owned SMEs in Uganda.

Keywords: Communication of succession intent, Succession planning, Corporate Governance, Sustainability, Family-Owned SMEs

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1. Introduction

Family-owned businesses (FOBs) dominate global economies, contributing between 70–98% of enterprises, generating over 75% of GDP, and employing more than 75% of the workforce (Arduino, 2025; Alfredo et al., 2012). Yet succession planning remains a critical challenge: only 30% of FOBs transition to the second generation, 12% to the third, and fewer than 5% beyond the

fourth (Ward, 2011; Byrd & Megginson, 2013). Failures often stem from poor successor identification, inadequate training, weak communication, and fragile governance (Chrisman & Patel, 2012).

In Uganda, FOBs contribute over 70% of GDP and employ 75% of the workforce, yet only 26% have documented succession plans (PwC, 2020; Mazzi, 2021). Succession remains informal, gender-biased, and poorly governed, with 73% prioritizing male successors and only 39% of

women participating in leadership (Munene, 2024). Weak governance structures exacerbate vulnerability, as seen in failures such as Ssembuule Steel Rolling Mills and WBS Television (Mutebi et al., 2024; Luyombya, 2021).

This study draws on three complementary theories: the Resource-Based View (RBV) (Penrose, 1959; Barney, 1991), Stewardship Theory (Donaldson & Davis, 1989; Chrisman, 2019), and the Modified Family Succession and Transition Model (Turyatunga, 2023). Together, these provide a holistic framework for analyzing succession, governance, and sustainability.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

This study was intended to explore how communication of succession intent influences the sustainability of selected family-owned SMEs in Uganda's central region, mediated by governance practices, and to develop a succession planning practices model tailored for family-owned businesses in Central Uganda.

1.2 Research Objectives:

1. To assess the influence of clarity of succession strategies on the sustainability of selected family-owned SMEs in Uganda's central region,
2. To examine the contribution of employee engagement in succession processes to the sustainability of selected family-owned SMEs in Uganda's central region,
3. To evaluate the influence of the alignment of roles with career growth on the sustainability of selected family-owned SMEs in Uganda's central region,
4. To assess the mediating role of corporate governance frameworks between communication of succession intent and the sustainability of family-owned businesses

1.3 Hypothesis

There is no significant relationship between communication of succession intent and sustainability of family-owned SMEs in Uganda's Central region.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on family business longevity in Uganda reveals tensions between succession planning and governance. Munene (2024) advanced a multi-theoretical model but overlooked governance structures. Turyatunga (2023) emphasized founder influence but relied heavily on RBV. Nakirya (2018) linked succession planning to project success but failed to operationalize measurable dimensions. Kokunda (2024) highlighted nepotism but ignored governance frameworks.

Theoretical debates show RBV emphasizes leveraging unique resources but neglects external pressures (Barney, 1991). Stewardship Theory highlights trust and long-term responsibility but assumes intrinsic motivation (Donaldson & Davis, 1989). Turyatunga's Modified Model fosters role clarity but focuses only on successful firms. This study integrates these perspectives to propose a governance-driven framework.

Clear communication of succession strategies fosters transparency and trust (Rothwell, 2010; Harris & Saldanha, 2021), while employee engagement enhances preparedness (Mitchell et al., 2022). Role alignment supports career growth and sustainability (Byrd & Megginson, 2013). Corporate governance mediates these processes by institutionalizing accountability and professionalism (Cadbury, 1992; Schein, 2010).

Business sustainability in family-owned SMEs is the ability to maintain resilience and continuity during disruptions while safeguarding intergenerational value (Owusu et al., 2024; Bajgorić et al., 2019). Governance frameworks reinforce fairness, collaboration, and innovation (Fombrun & van Riel, 2021; Brown & Treviño, 2006). However, nepotism and family conflicts weaken resilience (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). Sustainability requires integrated strategies where communication clarity, employee engagement, and career alignment are embedded within governance frameworks.

1.4 Conceptual Framework

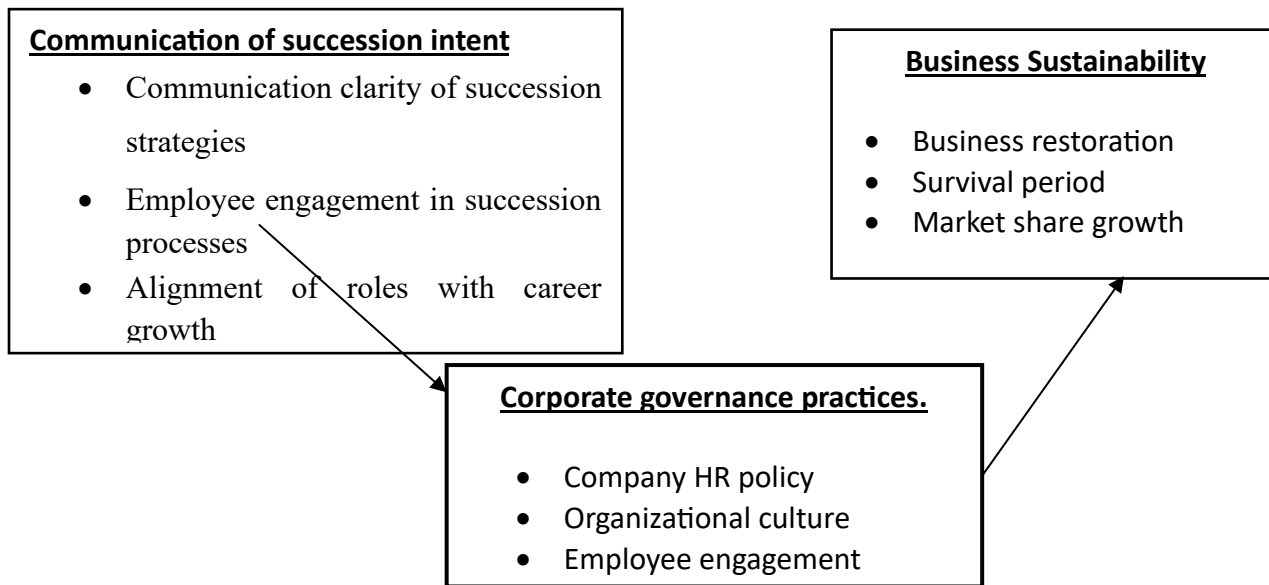


Figure 1.1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Adopted from Mauri (2020) and modified by the researcher (2024)

Conceptual Review

The conceptual framework illustrated above connects three core constructs, communication of succession intent, corporate governance practices, and business sustainability, to explain how leadership continuity and organizational resilience are achieved in family-owned SMEs.

Communication of succession intent emphasizes clarity in succession strategies, employee engagement, and alignment of roles with career growth. These elements foster transparency, trust, and preparedness among employees, reducing uncertainty during leadership transitions. When succession communication is clear and participatory, it enhances motivation and ensures that successors are well-equipped to sustain organizational performance.

Corporate governance practices act as the mediating mechanism that institutionalizes these communication processes. Through effective HR policies, strong organizational culture, and employee engagement, governance ensures accountability, fairness, and professionalism in leadership transitions. Good governance also mitigates risks associated with nepotism and poor decision-making, aligning succession planning with strategic objectives.

Ultimately, these dynamics influence business sustainability, reflected in business restoration, survival period, and market share growth. Sustainability depends on how well communication and governance interact to maintain operational continuity, stakeholder confidence, and adaptability to external challenges. Thus, the framework suggests that transparent succession communication, supported by sound governance, drives long-term resilience and growth in family-owned SMEs.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

To provide both empirical evidence and contextual understanding of succession processes within family-owned businesses, a pragmatic philosophical approach with a mixed-methods convergent design was adopted to examine the relationship between communication of succession intent and the sustainability of selected family-owned enterprises in Uganda's central region. A structured survey was administered to collect measurable evidence on communication intent and the sustainability of family-owned enterprises. At the same time, interview guides were used to explore respondents' perceptions and opinions regarding communication of succession intent on succession communication intent. Both quantitative and

qualitative data were separately collected and analyzed, then integrated during the interpretation

3.2 Sampling and Samples

Using Yamane's formula at a 7% margin of error, a sample of 166 respondents was obtained from a total population of 1,500, from selected family-owned businesses in the Central Region of Uganda, comprising first-, second-, and third-generation businesses, and the respondents included owners, successors, shareholders, managers, heads of departments, and human resource professionals. Simple random sampling and purposive sampling were used to identify participants with direct knowledge and experience of succession processes for both quantitative and qualitative components. The qualitative sample comprised key informants and other knowledgeable participants drawn from the different generational categories. Interviews continued until sufficient thematic saturation was achieved.

3.3 Data Collection Tools

Data collection instruments were developed from the study objectives and relevant literature and were reviewed and pre-tested before the main data collection to improve clarity, relevance, and consistency. The study employed a self-administered structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The questionnaire used mainly closed-ended items measured on a five-point Likert scale and collected quantitative information on communication of succession intent and business sustainability. The open-ended questions contained in the semi-structured interview guide focused on how succession intentions were communicated, understood, and managed within family-owned businesses.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Following approval of the study and the necessary ethical clearance, permission was obtained from the selected family-owned businesses. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the procedures involved before providing informed consent. Questionnaires were administered to the selected respondents and collected after completion. Key informants and other purposively selected participants were contacted to arrange interview sessions. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or virtually,

depending on participants' availability. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Google Forms were administered electronically in cases where physical administration of questionnaires was not possible.

3.5 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Quantitative data were coded, cleaned, and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize respondents' characteristics and responses to the study constructs. Pearson's product-moment correlation was used to examine the direction and strength of the relationship between communication of succession intent and business sustainability. Qualitative interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcripts were reviewed, coded, and organized into categories and themes reflecting participants' experiences and perceptions of succession communication and business sustainability. Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of the study phenomenon.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study obtained the required institutional ethical approval and research clearance before commencement of data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were provided with information about the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Participants' identities were protected through confidentiality and anonymization procedures. The information collected was used solely for academic purposes and was securely stored with access restricted to the research team. For virtual interviews, participants' consent was obtained before audio recording. The study also respected participants' privacy, autonomy, and dignity throughout the research process.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Respondents' Perception of Communication of the Succession Intent

Table 1: Respondents' perception of communication of the Succession Intent

Communication of the Succession Intent	N	Strongly Disagree	Disagree,	Not sure	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. dev.	Interpretation
The organization communicates its succession planning strategy to all employees.	166	3.01	39.16	2.41	45.78	9.64	3.199	1.151	Moderate
Employees are informed about potential career pathways related to succession planning.	166	1.81	13.86	4.22	71.69	8.43	3.711	0.874	High
There are open forums for discussing succession planning within the organization.	166	1.81	28.31	4.82	58.43	6.63	3.398	1.026	Moderate
Leadership communicates the importance of succession planning effectively.	166	1.2	4.82	7.23	78.92	7.83	3.873	0.662	High
Employees are encouraged to express their interest in succession opportunities.	166	1.2	12.05	3.01	70.48	13.25	3.825	0.853	High
The organization's succession intent is included in employee performance reviews.	166	0.6	16.87	7.23	65.06	10.24	3.675	0.896	High
Feedback from employees on succession communication is solicited regularly.	166	3.01	17.47	1.81	64.46	13.25	3.675	1.010	High
The organization uses various channels to communicate succession plans.	166	3.61	19.88	0.6	63.86	12.05	3.608	1.049	High
There is clarity about the timeline for succession planning within the organization.	166	2.41	16.27	2.41	70.48	8.43	3.663	0.931	High
Employees understand how succession planning impacts their roles and career growth.	166	1.2	3.01	7.23	79.52	9.04	3.922	0.623	High
Overall							3.655	0.722	High

Key: Likert Scale:5= Strongly agree (SA), 4= Agree (A), 3= Not sure (NS), 2= Disagree (D), and 1= Strongly disagree (SD).

Likert Mean: less than 3 = Disagreement and greater than 3= Agreement. *Legend: Very high (4.24 – 5.00), High (3.43 – 4.23), Moderate (2.62 – 3.42), Low (1.81 – 2.61), Very Low (1.00 – 1.80)*

Source: Primary data 2025

Overall communication effectiveness had a mean of 3.655 (SD = 0.722), indicating moderately positive perceptions. Strengths included leadership messaging (M = 3.873) and role alignment (M = 3.922). Weaknesses included

inconsistent strategy dissemination (M = 3.199) and limited forums (M = 3.398).

Qualitative insights revealed emotional reluctance (“letting go feels like losing a piece of myself”) and informal practices (“everything is in my head”), but also positive

examples of transparency (“succession is not a family secret, it’s a transparent, merit-based process”).

4.2 Correlation and regression analysis

Table 2: Correlation analysis showing the relationship between Communication of the Succession Intent and business sustainability

	Commu_~t	Busine~y
Commu_Succ~t	1.0000	
Business_S~y	0.5802 0.0000	1.0000

Source: Primary data 2025

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive relationship ($r = 0.580$, $p < 0.001$) between communication of succession intent and business sustainability in family-owned enterprises. This means that enterprises that clearly communicate succession strategies, engage their employees in consistent feedback mechanisms, and continually align employee roles to career growth significantly predict business sustainability in family-owned enterprises. The model explained about 33.7% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.337$), showing that clear and structured communication contributes substantially to continuity and resilience. The regression coefficient ($\beta = 0.362$, $t = 9.12$, $p < 0.001$) indicates that improvements in succession communication are directly associated with higher sustainability outcomes. The overall model was statistically significant ($F(1,164) = 83.23$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that the relationship is robust and not due to chance.

These results suggest that enterprises that communicate succession strategies, timelines, and career pathways more effectively achieve stronger employee engagement, reduced uncertainty, and improved long-term performance. However, since the model accounts for only one-third of the variance, other factors such as training, governance, and leadership development also play important roles in sustainability.

4.3 Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis testing provided strong evidence against the null hypothesis, confirming that communication of succession intent has a significant positive effect on business sustainability. Both correlation ($r = 0.580$, $p < 0.001$) and regression results reinforce that transparent and structured communication is a critical driver of resilience and continuity in Ugandan family-owned enterprises.

In essence, the findings highlight that while succession communication is a powerful predictor of sustainability, it must be complemented by broader organizational practices to secure long-term success. Timelines and career pathways tend to achieve stronger continuity, higher employee engagement, and better long-term performance. The statistical significance confirms that this relationship is genuine and not due to chance.

However, the moderate strength of the correlation also indicates that while transparent succession communication is a critical driver of sustainability, other practices, such as training, governance structures, and leadership development, play equally important roles. In essence, effective communication enhances resilience and continuity, but broader organizational systems must complement it to secure sustainable success.

Table 3: Regression analysis showing the relationship between Communication of the Succession Intent and business sustainability

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs	=	166
Model	11.2666453	1	11.2666453	F(1, 164)	=	83.23
Residual	22.2016078	164	.135375657	Prob > F	=	0.0000
				R-squared	=	0.3366
				Adj R-squared	=	0.3326
Total	33.4682531	165	.202837898	Root MSE	=	.36793

Business_Sustainability	Coefficient	Std. err.	t	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	
Commu_Succession_Intent	.361758	.0396544	9.12	0.000	.283459	.4400569
_cons	2.666394	.1477163	18.05	0.000	2.374723	2.958065

Source: Primary data 2025

The regression analysis demonstrated that communication of succession intent significantly predicts business sustainability in family-owned enterprises. The model explained about 33.7% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.337$), showing that clear and structured communication contributes substantially to continuity and resilience.

The regression coefficient ($\beta = 0.362$, $t = 9.12$, $p < 0.001$) indicates that improvements in succession communication are directly associated with higher sustainability outcomes, while the overall model was statistically significant ($F(1,164) = 83.23$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that the relationship is robust and not due to chance.

These results suggest that enterprises that communicate succession strategies, engage in employee timelines and feedback dissemination, and align roles to career pathways more effectively achieve stronger employee engagement, reduced uncertainty, and improved long-term performance. However, since the model accounts for only one-third of the variance, other factors such as training, governance, and leadership development also play important roles in sustainability.

Hypothesis testing provided strong evidence against the null hypothesis, confirming that communication of succession intent has a significant positive effect on business sustainability. Both correlation ($r = 0.580$, $p < 0.001$) and regression results reinforce that transparent and structured communication is a critical driver of resilience and continuity in Ugandan family-owned enterprises.

In conclusion, the findings highlight that while succession communication is a powerful predictor of sustainability, it must be complemented by broader organizational practices to secure long-term success.

4.4 Discussion of findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that communication of succession intent in Ugandan family-owned enterprises is moderately effective, with strengths in leadership messaging, career pathway awareness, and employee engagement, but weaknesses in consistency, structured forums, and clarity of timelines. These results create fundamental scholarly debate with existing scholarly works.

The moderately positive overall perception ($M = 3.655$) supports Harris and Saldanha (2021), who argue that communication strategies during leadership transitions are essential for building trust and engagement. However, the inconsistency revealed in this study diverges from their emphasis on systematic communication, suggesting that while intent exists, execution remains fragmented. This gap undermines organizational stability, echoing García-Sánchez et al. (2021), who contend that incomplete governance practices weaken sustainability reporting and resilience.

The mixed responses regarding communication of succession strategies ($M = 3.199$) further illustrate this challenge. Eccles and Klimenko (2019) emphasize that stakeholders increasingly demand transparency in governance, including succession planning. The uneven dissemination of strategies in Ugandan enterprises therefore risks eroding both internal confidence and external legitimacy. Similarly, Elliott (2021) links weak communication structures to reduced resilience in times of crisis, reinforcing the need for institutionalized clarity.

Positive perceptions of career pathway awareness ($M = 3.711$) and encouragement to express interest ($M = 3.825$) align with Hernandez et al. (2022), who highlight the importance of employee engagement in leadership

development. These findings suggest that when employees are informed and actively involved, succession planning becomes more inclusive and sustainable. Leadership communication ($M = 3.873$) also supports Brown and Treviño's (2006) view that ethical and transparent leadership fosters trust and strengthens organizational culture, thereby reinforcing long-term vision.

Nevertheless, weaknesses in integration into performance reviews ($M = 3.675$) and clarity of timelines ($M = 3.663$) diverge from Flammer et al. (2019), who argue that embedding governance and sustainability practices into formal systems is essential for continuity. The lack of systematic integration in Ugandan enterprises reduces accountability and limits succession planning's impact on sustainability. Freeman et al. (2020) similarly stress stakeholder inclusivity, yet the inconsistent solicitation of employee feedback ($M = 3.675$) shows that employee voice is not fully institutionalized, weakening adaptability.

Qualitative findings deepen this debate. Leaders admitted to unclear communication ("everything is in my head") and emotional reluctance ("letting go feels like losing a piece of myself"), which explain the quantitative gaps in clarity and timelines. These insights align with Hernandez (2012), who emphasizes the psychological dimensions of stewardship in family businesses. Conversely, positive examples of open dialogue ("regular sit-downs not just about profits, but about purpose") and formalized transparency ("succession is not a family secret, it's a transparent, merit-based process") illustrate practices that align with contemporary governance literature, reinforcing the argument that structured communication fosters trust and sustainability.

Taken together, the findings both confirm and challenge recent scholarship. They confirm the importance of transparency, leadership communication, and employee engagement, but they also reveal cultural and emotional barriers that hinder systematic governance. This tension underscores the need for family-owned enterprises to move beyond informal practices and embed succession planning into formal structures to ensure sustainability.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Succession communication in Ugandan family-owned enterprises is moderately effective but inconsistent. While leadership messaging and employee engagement are strong, weaknesses in clarity, structured forums, and integration into performance reviews limit sustainability. The findings align with scholarly emphasis on transparency and engagement but diverge in their exposure of emotional and cultural barriers that hinder systematic governance.

5.2 Recommendations

To strengthen succession planning and ensure sustainability, family-owned enterprise managers should formalize communication strategies across all organizational levels, using multiple channels and clear timelines to reduce uncertainty. They should institutionalize open forums and systematic feedback mechanisms to encourage participatory dialogue and inclusivity. Finally, enterprise owners as well as their managers should integrate succession planning into performance reviews, link it to structured career pathways, and ensure that employee development aligns with organizational needs while building a sustainable leadership pipeline.

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